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The Syrians are watching

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In one of Old Damascus' new cafes, text messages buzzed between mobiles in quick succession, drawing woops of joy and thumbs up from astonished Syrians.

Suzan Mubarak, the wife of the Egyptian president, had flown into exile with her son - so the rumours went - driven out of the country by days of unprecedented protest against the 30-year rule of her husband.

The news from Cairo brought a flutter of excitement to this country, founded on principles so similar to Egypt that the two nations were once joined as one.

Like Egypt, Syria has been ruled for decades by a single party, with a security service that maintains an iron grip on its citizens. Both countries have been struggling to reform economies stifled for generations by central control in an effort to curb unemployment among a ballooning youth demographic.

Could the domino effect that spread from the streets of Tunis to Cairo soon hit Damascus?

"Perhaps the Saudis will have to build a whole village for Arab presidents once they run out of villas," joked a taxi driver, wondering if Hosni Mubarak would go the same way as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the Tunisian president who flew into exile in Saudi Arabia after street protests brought down his regime.

Through the haze

In a smoky tea shop in central Damascus, the usual babble of conversation was subdued as customers sat quietly but intently watching the TV broadcasting images of flames pouring from Egypt's ruling party's head office, a Soviet-era building much like many of those that house the state institutions in their own capital.

The young waiter, though, was sceptical that real change would come to Egypt. "Mubarak won't go. Why did the Egyptian people wait until now? It's only because of Tunisia. I'd like him to go, but he won't."

Others, though, said the genie was already out of the bottle.

"The most important message is that people can make the change. Before it was always army officers that lead a coup," said Mazen Darwich, whose Syrian Centre for Media, which campaigns for press freedoms in Syria, was closed by authorities soon after opening.

"It may not be tomorrow or a few months but I'm sure it is like dominoes. Before there was always an ideology - pan-Arabism or being an enemy of Israel. But now people are simply looking for their personal freedom, for food, education, a good life. The days of ideology are over."

On Friday evening, as protests in Cairo reached a crescendo, the streets of Damascus were unusually quiet, with many people staying at home to watch the news. Syria's state-run media quoted some news reports from Cairo, but offered no comment or analysis on the situation.

By Saturday morning life had returned to normal with few signs, on the surface at least, that the authorities were concerned about potential unrest.

Socialising by proxy

Online, however, it was a different story. Internet users reported a significant slowdown in the web, with searches for news on Egypt often crashing browsers.

Heavy user traffic could be an explanation but in Syria, where thousands of websites deemed opposed to state interests are blocked and where Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media are banned, authorities denied accusations they had restricted the service to prevent citizens hearing about events in Cairo.

Earlier this week, though, authorities banned programmes that allow access to Facebook Chat from mobile phones, a cheap and easy means of staying in touch that had exploded in popularity among young Syrians.

"People here are suffering much more than Egypt or Tunisia but you don't see it. They keep their mouths shut because they don't want to be locked up for 10 years," said a graduate medical student, surfing the web at an internet cafe.

Sitting next to him, a young lady finished updating her Facebook page and chatting with friends online - one of thousands of young Syrians adept at using proxy servers to get around the official ban on Facebook.

Although internet users must register their names with the cafe on a list that can be collected by the police, when asked if she had any concerns over breaking the ban on Facebook the young woman said all her friends do the same thing.

Indeed, President Bashar al-Assad, who opened Syria up to the internet when he succeeded his late father in 2000, has his own Facebook page.

As much as possible, as much as necessary

Al-Assad has weathered five years of intense US-led pressure against his regime, was driven out of Lebanon over accusations of having killed Rafiq al-Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, and, as the memoirs of George W Bush, the former US president, revealed, was considered next on America's list for regime change, after the toppling of Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

Today, however, the Iraq war will be remembered as a strategic disaster for the US, it is Syria's ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah, rather than Damascus itself which is set to be accused of involvement in al-Hariri's killing and Syria's allies are back in power in Lebanon.

"What happened in Tunisia and Egypt was not just about hunger, it was about national pride," said Mazen Bilal, the editor of Suria al-Ghad, a political news website familiar with government thinking.

"Syria is another story. Through all the problems it maintained its national stances and its sovereignty and so people are proud of their nation."

Crucially, as well, the government's reform of the economy is maintaining a system of support to alleviate the worst effects of poverty.

"Egypt and Tunisia applied the free market principles, but Syria has not. The government still controls the strategic keys to the economy," said Bilal. "It's even opening up new jobs in the public sector to absorb more workers."

Abdullah Dardari, the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, said five years of reforms had increased incomes above the increase in inflation, with the relative spending power of the poor growing faster than the rich.

One in 10 Syrians live in poverty - but this figure is far below Egypt's rate of some 40 per cent. Official figures in Syria show unemployment fell from over 12 per cent in 2005 to 8.1 per cent in 2009, one per cent lower than the official rate in Egypt, where some analysts put it as high as 25 per cent. Average salaries in Syria have risen to \$200 over the past few years, more than double the rate in Egypt.

The government has promised increased spending on social security and training for the out-of-work and aims to curb rapid population growth of 2.45 per cent by raising the minimum age of marriage.

Economist Bassel Kaghadou, writing in the English-language monthly *Syria Today*, spelled out Syria's cautious approach to reforms: "As much market economy as possible with as much state intervention as necessary."

In recent months, Al-Assad has been criss-crossing eastern Europe, meeting leaders there to outline his vision for a 'Six Seas' Trade bloc, linking the Gulf to the Mediterranean and the Caspian, Black, Adriatic and Red seas, putting Syria at the centre of the regional energy and transportation network.

All across Damascus, symbols of a burgeoning middle class are spreading, from a sleek sandstone shopping mall, home to Costa Coffee and a bright new art gallery, to the Lebanese banks opening sparkling new branches for the first time.

But as the young doctor put it, looking up at the cameras inside the internet cafe: "Everything here is under control, even if it looks open."